

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
May 30, 2011

Thank you. Thank you so much. Please be seated.

Thank you, Secretary Gates, and thank you for your extraordinary service to our Nation. I think that Bob Gates will go down as one of our finest Secretaries of Defense in our history, and it's been an honor to serve with him.

I also want to say a word about Admiral Mullen. On a day when we are announcing his successor as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and as he looks forward to a well-deserved retirement later this year, Admiral Mullen, on behalf of all Americans, we want to say thank you for your four decades of service to this great country. We want to thank Deborah Mullen, as well, for her extraordinary service. To Major General Karl Horst, the commanding general of our Military District of Washington; Mrs. Nancy Horst; Mr. Patrick Hallinan, the superintendent of Arlington National Cemetery, as well as his lovely wife Doreen; and to Chaplain Steve Berry, thank you for your extraordinary service.

It is a great privilege to return here to our national sanctuary, this most hallowed ground, to commemorate Memorial Day with all of you: with Americans who've come to pay their respects, with members of our military and their families, with veterans whose service we will never forget and always honor, and with Gold Star families whose loved ones rest all around us in eternal peace.

To those of you who mourn the loss of a loved one today, my heart goes out to you. I love my daughters more than anything in the world, and I cannot imagine losing them. I can't imagine losing a sister, brother, or parent at war. The grief so many of you carry in your hearts is a grief I cannot fully know.

This day is about you and the fallen heroes that you loved. And it's a day that has meaning for all Americans, including me. It's one of my highest honors, it is my most solemn responsibility, as President, to serve as Commander in Chief of one of the finest fighting forces the world has ever known. And it's a responsibility that carries a special weight on this day; that carries a special weight each time I meet with our Gold Star families and I see the pride in their eyes, but also the tears of pain that will never fully go away; each time I sit down at my desk and sign a condolence letter to the family of the fallen.

Sometimes a family will write me back and tell me about their daughter or son that they've lost, or a friend will write me a letter about what their battle buddy meant to them. I received one such letter from an Army veteran named Paul Tarbox after I visited Arlington a couple of years ago. Paul saw a photograph of me walking through section 60, where the heroes who fell in Iraq and Afghanistan lay, by a headstone marking the final resting place of Staff Sergeant Joe Phaneuf.

Joe, he told me, was a friend of his, one of the best men he'd ever known, the kind of guy who could have the entire barracks in laughter, who was always there to lend a hand, from being a volunteer coach to helping build a playground. It was a moving letter, and Paul closed it with a few words about the hallowed cemetery where we are gathered here today. He wrote, "The venerable warriors that slumber there knew full well the risks that are associated with military service and felt pride in defending our democracy." "The true lesson of Arlington," he

continued, is that "each headstone is that of a patriot. Each headstone shares a story. Thank you for letting me share with you the story about my friend Joe."

Staff Sergeant Joe Phaneuf was a patriot, like all the venerable warriors who lay here and across this country and around the globe. Each of them adds honor to what it means to be a soldier, sailor, airman, marine, and coastguardsman. Each is a link in an unbroken chain that stretches back to the earliest days of our Republic. And on this day, we memorialize them all.

We memorialize our first patriots—blacksmiths and farmers, slaves and freedmen—who never knew the independence they won with their lives. We memorialize the armies of men—and women disguised as men—black and white, who fell in apple orchards and cornfields in a war that saved our Union. We memorialize those who gave their lives on the battlefields of our times—from Normandy to Manila, Inchon to Khe Sanh, Baghdad to Helmand—and in jungles, deserts, and city streets around the world.

What bonds this chain together across the generations, this chain of honor and sacrifice, is not only a common cause, our country's cause, but also a spirit captured in a Book of Isaiah, a familiar verse, mailed to me by the Gold Star parents of 2d Lieutenant Mike McGahan: "When I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me!'"

That's what we memorialize today. That spirit that says: "Send me!"—no matter the mission; "Send me!"—no matter the risk; "Send me!"—no matter how great the sacrifice I am called to make. The patriots we memorialize today sacrificed not only all they had, but all they would ever know. They gave of themselves until they had nothing more to give. It's natural, when we lose someone we care about, to ask why it had to be them. Why my son, why my sister, why my friend, why not me?

These are questions that cannot be answered by us. But on this day, we remember that it is on our behalf that they gave our lives—they gave their lives. We remember that it is their courage, their unselfishness, their devotion to duty that has sustained this country through all its trials and will sustain us through all the trials to come. We remember that the blessings we enjoy as Americans came at a dear cost, that our very presence here today, as free people in a free society, bears testimony to their enduring legacy.

Our Nation owes a debt to its fallen heroes that we can never fully repay. But we can honor their sacrifice, and we must. We must honor it in our own lives by holding their memories close to our hearts and heeding the example they set. And we must honor it as a nation by keeping our sacred trust with all who wear America's uniform, and the families who love them, by never giving up the search for those who've gone missing under our country's flag or are held as prisoners of war, by serving our patriots as well as they serve us, from the moment they enter the military to the moment they leave it, to the moment they are laid to rest.

That is how we can honor the sacrifice of those we've lost. That is our obligation to America's guardians, guardians like Travis Manion. The son of a marine, Travis aspired to follow in his father's footsteps and was accepted by the USS Naval Academy. His roommate at the Academy was Brendan Looney, a star athlete and born leader from a military family, just like Travis. The two quickly became best friends. "Like brothers," Brendan said.

After graduation, they deployed: Travis to Iraq and Brendan to Korea. On April 29, 2007, while fighting to rescue his fellow marines from danger, Travis was killed by a sniper. Brendan did what he had to do. He kept going. He poured himself into his SEAL training and dedicated

it to the friend that he missed. He married the woman he loved. And his tour in Korea behind him, he deployed to Afghanistan. On September 21st of last year, Brendan gave his own life, along with eight others, in a helicopter crash.

Heartbroken, yet filled with pride, the Manions and the Looneys knew only one way to honor their sons' friendship. They moved Travis from his cemetery in Pennsylvania and buried them side by side here at Arlington. "Warriors for freedom," reads the epitaph written by Travis's father, "brothers forever."

The friendship between 1st Lieutenant Travis Manion and Lieutenant Brendan Looney reflects the meaning of Memorial Day: brotherhood, sacrifice, love of country. And it is my fervent prayer that we may honor the memory of the fallen by living out those ideals every day of our lives, in the military and beyond. May God bless the souls of the venerable warriors we've lost and the country for which they died.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:25 a.m. in Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, USA, Chairman-designate, Joint Chiefs of Staff; Timothy and Carolyn McGahan, parents of 2nd Lt. Michael E. McGahan, USA; Thomas and Janet Manion, parents of 1st Lt. Travis J.L. Manion, USMC; and Amy Looney, wife, and Kevin and Maureen Looney, parents, of Lt. Brendan J. Looney, USN.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Berry, Steven; Dempsey, Martin E.; Gates, Robert M.; Hallinan, Doreen; Hallinan, Patrick K.; Horst, Karl R.; Horst, Nancy; Looney, Amy; Looney, Kevin; Looney, Maureen; Manion, Janet; Manion, Thomas; McGahan, Carolyn; McGahan, Timothy; Mullen, Deborah; Mullen, Michael G.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Tarbox, Paul.

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